CHOOSE LIFE

May 31, 1987, 11:00 a.m. Worship Service

John Buchanan

Fourth Presbyterian Church, Chicago

Scripture
John 5:2-9

"Do you want to be healed?...Rise, take up your pallet, and walk."
-John 5:6,8 (RSV)

Arthur Miller's Pulitzer Prize winning play, Death of a Salesman, is about a man who wants more for his family than he is able to provide. When it becomes clear that Willie Loman's dreams are going to remain dreams, his self respect, his sense of meaning and his vitality begin a long and tragic process of decline. The play is powerful. Miller's genius is in portraying one of the great tragic human themes in a way almost everybody can recognize - namely, the futility of waiting for a future which is not going to come. All of us, in some way, identify with that. Early in the play Willie's grown sons are talking about life and their plans and hopes for the future. One of them says:

"All I can do now is wait for the merchandise manager to die. And suppose I get to be merchandise manager... I don't know what I am working for. Sometimes I sit in my apartment all alone, and I think of the rent I'm paying, and it's crazy. But then it's what I always wanted. My own apartment, and car, and plenty of women... And still... I'm lonely." [p. 23, Penguin Books]

There is something universal and also very specific about that experience: something timeless but also timely. We invest an enormous amount of our lives - our energy, our skills, passion and time - in the future, building, preparing, saving, planning and waiting. And sometimes when we step back from our busy frantic lives long enough to see clearly, it appears that our investment in the future is so heavy that we have nothing left for living in the present. And so sometimes, like Happy Loman, in Death of a Salesman, life does feel like it's on hold, like a process of waiting - waiting for the merchandise manager to die, for the ship to come in, for graduation day, till I'm 16, 21, 30, 40,... waiting for the future to arrive.

Once there was a man who invested thirty-eight years in the task of waiting for the future. He is one of those remarkable and interesting characters remembered by the author of the Gospel of John... Nicodemus, the Blind Man, the Woman at the Well, Mary Magdalene. We encounter him lying

on a mat, beside a large pool, in Jerusalem, in 30 A.D. The Pool of Bethesda, which means "house of healing," has been excavated. It is a large pool, trapazoidal in shape. There were porches on the four sides and one on a large divider which runs through the middle of the pool. The pool was fed by ground water and an intermittent spring. When the spring flowed, the water on the normally placid surface splashed and danced mysteriously. There is some evidence that the water changed color during the disturbance. There was always a sense of mystery about that phenomenon. And even without the mystery, it was a pretty interesting show. People drive a long way to see a lot less. In any event, it was widely held in those days that a spirit disturbed the waters, in this case an angel of the Lord, and that the first person in the water during the disturbance would be healed: - not really so different from the more extravagant claims of hot-tub commercials or, for that matter, not too far from the therapeutic merit which sitting in water clearly has. [See Raymond E. Brown, John, Vol. I, p. 209 ff]

So... around the perimeters of this pool, under the porches, were the crippled, the sick, the aged, sitting, lying on their mats, watching the pool, waiting. Some surely had a friend or relative waiting with them, ready to assist as soon as the water began to churn. And some of them were alone, watching intently, anxiously hoping to scramble to the side as soon as it happened. And then there were some - and I have the sense that they may have been the majority - who were alone, and who were watching less intently. These were the ones who had concluded that the future wasn't going to come, that they were not going to make it to the pool, not ever. They would continue going through the motions, to be sure. They would be there, lying on their mats, but they were resigned to the status quo.

This is a masterpiece of a scene. I see in it a reflection of the convalarium at the Veterans' Hospital, where men - utterly forgotten, have sat in wheel chairs watching television for decades, and a bit of a reflection of the mid-day scene at the Water Tower Park, and two blocks from here, where the homeless assemble in a kind of community, and I see in it a reflection of a slice out of the life of everyone of us who has ever engaged in the careful ritual there being rehearsed. The necessary accommodations had been made, the rationale carefully worded and practiced. "There is no one to help me, someone always pushes me out of the way and steps in front of me." Someone said this fellow would be funny if he wasn't so pathetic, "with his unimaginative approach to the curative waters... his crotchety grumbling about the 'whippersnappers who outrace him.'" [Ibid - R. S. Brown]

A complex new dynamic is now emerging. The man has a support system, a community of misery devoted to enabling its participants to continue the ritual, waiting for a future to happen which they know will never happen. The community is important here. The community allows the charade to continue. By common consent, everyone gets to choose the status quo and then, without challenge, to complain about it. There was definitely something to be said for life around the pool. It was not an unpleasant place to be. Passersby often left a little money for food. The man had his special spot, sun in the morning, shade in the afternoon: he had his cronies with whom to pass the time of day, talk about the Cubs, read the paper, play a little gin rummy. He had his bed to lie on. A "game," Dr. Eric Berne taught us, in his book Games People Play, is a ritual, the

purpose of which is not what it appears to be, and often is contrary to its stated purpose. A favorite game, a very common game is "Ain't it Awful" in which the players get to lament the terrible state of things and enjoy the ritual of hand-wringing, and brow furrowing. The purpose of the game, of course, is actually to prevent anybody from doing anything about "it" so that tomorrow another round of "Ain't it Awful" can be played.

The author of the Fourth Gospel presents this story with artistic symmetry, and wants us to see in it something critical about the power of Jesus Christ to bring new life into the personal histories of some disturbingly familiar human characters so that they are - after encountering him - literally "born again." When Jesus encounters the thirty-eight year veteran of the waiting game he asks a question which violates every precept of common courtesy and of the non-directive counseling techniques which we all carefully learned, and which avoids the direct confrontation, and instead rephrases the client's questions and concerns and redirects them... "So you're feeling helpless... I hear you saying you're feeling a little negative about your prospects... So you feel like you really can't manage to make it to the pool alone..." Instead Jesus of Nazareth looks him in the eye and asks, "Do you want to be healed?"

What kind of a question is that? Of course he wants to be healed. Why else would he have spent the last thirty-eight years on the porch watching the pool, waiting... And yet, it really is "the" question, isn't it? Ruminating about the text and literally being pulled into it I thought about how unsettling it would be for a physician to enter the examination room, in which you have been shivering, partially clothed, for a long time, but a little less than thirty-eight years, and ask, "Mr. Buchanan, do you want to be well?" And then it occurred to me that a good physician does, in fact, ask that question; not in those words and perhaps not even consciously. We have learned that the starting point of the physician's ability to assist the process of healing is somewhere close to the patient's desire to be well ... the patient's will.

There is mounting evidence that without this will to live, healing does not easily happen. After his now famous battle with a rare blood disease, Norman Cousins wrote, "The will to live is not a theoretical abstraction but a physical reality with therapeutic characteristics." Cousins cites research which connects the robust will to live with chemical balances in the brain. [Anatomy Of An Illness, p. 44-48]

"Do you want to be healed?" Jesus asked. It was and is "the" critical question. Significantly, the man never answers. Instead, he plays a little "Ain't it awful?" and complains about his hard luck and the impossible prospect of ever making it into the pool on time. Jesus apparently, is not interested in that. He wants this man's will -- the life force buried deep in the heart of this person who had literally given up and so he says - "Get up. Take up that pallet - that symbol of the status quo - get up and walk!"

If you and I are to be fully alive, we have to choose to be alive which may mean choosing to stop engaging in the ritual behavior whose real purpose is actually to rationalize the status quo and protect us from the

risk of new adventure. Now that is not an easy nor a simple matter. Rollo May, one of the wisest observers of our culture, suggests that modern life conspires against a strong, healthy individual will. Modern men and women feel powerless, May teaches, victims of huge global forces over which they have absolutely no control.

The philosophers and the theologians suggest that we are really talking about spiritual crisis; that each person is called to choose life, to decide to be, to affirm self in an act of personal will. Juergan Moltman wrote an eloquent little book, The Passion for Life, in which he observed that -

"Apathy seems to be a characteristic sign of the illness of our society... Interest in life is crippled. The courage to be is weakened... We must learn to love life with such a passion that we will no longer become accustomed to the powers of destruction." [p. 20-22]

To choose life is often to say no to the status quo and yes to change. That can be risky and dangerous. There are places in the world where that decision means siding with a revolution. Atlanta Mayor, Andrew Young, addressed the National Meeting of Presbyterian Men recently and in his opening told his audience that the world is in a mess and they were at fault. I chuckled when I read that. National meetings of Presbyterian men are largely white, middle aged, middle class men who after a while became accustomed to being scolded for being white, middle class, middle aged and male... and told that most of the world's problems are their fault... So my brothers were surprised and probably delighted when Mayor Young didn't scold them for being what they are but explained that there are thousands of Africans who were educated in Christian Missionary Schools, and in Christian colleges and universities, there and here, who became convinced of the power of the Gospel to change lives and actually to change the world, who heard and believed the Biblical stories, and who are now choosing life, not death, freedom not oppression, justice not injustice, compassion not cruelty, love not torture, hope not the grinding hopeless tragedy of the status quo... It is not the whole story - but it is at least part of the story in South Africa and South Korea and Argentina and Central America... It was not the whole story but it was an important part of the story when young black and white people sat down at lunch counters and said eloquently - "We believe Jesus was right... Justice is more powerful than injustice..."

There is a choice to be made by everyone of us. The man had been waiting by the pool for thirty-eight years. That's very close to a full career in our culture. So the story compels us to look at our lives. Are there familiar echoes here? Do you hear your own voice saying, "no one ever helps me, people always push ahead of me?" Do you ever engage in that comfortable litany which starts out, "Someday I'm going to ... ? Someday, when I accomplish my goals, when I get the degree, or the promotion, or the new office, or a new secretary, or the raise ... I'll be able to breathe easier and do the things that are important. Someday I'll read more books and see more plays and write poems. Someday I'm going to spend more time with my spouse and my children and my friends. Someday I'll lose twenty pounds, get in shape, quit smoking and take up pottery. But in the meantime, I just can't." Are there familiar echoes in that?

"Do you want to be healed? Do you want things to be different in your life?" To those blunt questions which Jesus asks, wouldn't integrity force many of us to say, "not really... no thank you. The status quo may not be what I want, but it's not as bad as trying to change it."

There are risks, after all, for the man in the story. When he obeyed the command of Jesus, picking up his bed and walking away, there was the risk that he might fall down. There was the very real uncertainty about the details of daily life.

Deprived of "alms for crippled people," where in the world does a newly-healed man find his next meal? No longer part of the community of misery, where will he find new friends?

The security of the known is often preferable to the radical insecurity of the unknown. If you have moved to a new place, or changed jobs, or significantly altered your behavior, you know how strong and powerful the status quo is. And here comes Jesus suggesting that we have a choice to make, that in some way, in some form, unique to each of us... each of us confronts the opportunity to choose life, to elect to be. Here comes Jesus suggesting that the trouble with life on the mat, in addition to its deadly sameness, is that it is not life at all.

The purpose of this story is to illustrate the idea of rebirth and the new life in Christ which is so important in the Fourth Gospel. "You must be born again" Jesus tells Nicodemus at the beginning of the Gospel, and each subsequent story, with a marvelous cast of characters, illustrates what that new birth looks like. If you eliminate spiritual rebirth from these stories, this one in particular, what is left is a kind of pious pep talk, a combination "I'm OK - You're OK seminar and Bobby Knight's locker room speech about how the essence of the self is played out on the court of life. Granted "Born Again" makes us nervous - granted when the talk turns to "Born Again Christianity" Presbyterians start looking for the exits. But what if being born again means something like what happened to this man beside the pool instead of the wretched excess of televangelism? What if it means the simple, quiet, personal and modest act of standing, rolling up your mat, and walking into the future? What if, instead of the arrogant exclusivism ... the offensive presumptuousness of friends who get born again and then seem to wallow in the delicious and exclusive sense that they have what you don't... What if being born again means, at heart, a passionate choosing of life instead of death?

It is impossible to study Scripture, I have found, without discovering something new. This time I uncovered the intriguing fact that this story was one of three stories from John which were used in preparing new converts for Baptism in the early Christian church. The three stories the First Century Club wanted its newest members, converts, to hear and to know - were the story of Nicodemus coming to Jesus at night - to learn that he had to be born again; the story of the Blind Man whose ability to see was restored by Jesus and this story - about a man who had been waiting for his life to happen for thirty-eight years.

How good it is today, as we confirm and commission new disciples - to

remember this story.

Jesus Christ calls us, in our time, to lay aside old securities, to stand up and against all the odds, sometimes in the face of our better judgment to walk into the future, fully alive. We would, of course, be more comfortable waiting. We would rather wait till our doubts are resolved before we join the church and commit ourselves to following him. We'd rather wait until he shows us a little bit about where he's headed before we agree to be a disciple. We'd rather not think new thoughts - our old opinions and prejudices are really rather comfortable. We'd rather not risk our love, our time, our money on a cause or a person who needs us. There is something to be said for life around the pool.

So it goes. So the dynamic continues in your life and mine. The choice comes at us every day. The Gospel of Jesus Christ is good news about a God who is always on the side of life; a God who nurtures and strengthens his people when they choose life. The Gospel is good news about a God passionately committed to life, a God who is a lover, who gets into life and who is honored and worshipped best where people love and live life fully and give their hearts away...

The Gospel is about a God who so loves this world that he gave his only son that people might live fully, joyfully and eternally.

That son, whom we know as Jesus the Christ, challenges us when we settle for less than life; when we opt for the status quo rather than creative change in our own lives.

The Gospel is about a Lord who loves each of us so much he wants us, wills us, to be fully alive: a Savior who invites us to pick up our bed and walk, to stand up and choose life and walk with him today and tomorrow and forever.

Lord God - we praise you for your unsettling love. Praise to you for disturbing quiet water on occasion.

Praise to you for making us important... for placing within us a lust for life - a passion for fullness...

And praise to you for your great gift of love and for the invitation to follow, your son, Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.